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# Book Reviews

*Narrating Karma and Rebirth: Buddhist and Jain Multi-life Stories*, by Naomi Appleton. Cambridge University Press, 2014. 244pp. Hb. £67.00; Pb. £23.99. ISBN-13: 978-1107566142.

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In *Narrating Karma and Rebirth*, Naomi Appleton guides us through the rich and fascinating multi-life stories of the early Buddhist and Jain traditions. The reader is introduced to a multitude of engaging tales which illustrate the great suffering, sensory pleasure, and 'happy endings' experienced by humans, animals, and beings from higher and lower realms over numerous lifetimes. By means of these narratives, Appleton illuminates the complexities of the relationship between *karma* and rebirth within each tradition, while capturing both the subtle and overt points of divergence between the traditions. In doing so this book offers important insight into the intricate workings of some key foundational doctrines of South Asian traditions, while illustrating the rich potential of their literary sources by centring the discussion upon Buddhist and Jain multi-life stories.

Over seven chapters Appleton engages the reader in a multi-layered analysis of the intricacies of *karma* and its relation to rebirth. In chapter two, 'Karma and the realms of rebirth' form the focus of discussion. The similarities between the Buddhist and Jain cosmologies are illustrated through the discussion of beings occupying the animal, hell, and heavenly realms, with multi-life stories illustrating the movement of beings between these realms. The more well-known differences between the traditions are also elaborated upon, such as differing views on the rebirth potential of plants and other single-sensed beings. Crucially the reasoning for the current state of each being is examined, but perhaps the most captivating discussion reflects upon the potential of these different beings to influence their *karma*. Occupying a distinctive place in the rebirth realms of Buddhist traditions, *pretas* become an interesting focus for the latter, as their former families have the unique potential to influence their current or future state through the ritual transfer of merit.

As Appleton notes, multi-life stories are both authored by humans and told to human audiences, thereby many such stories have a central human character, even when that character is reborn in a non-human realm. The opening discussion thus acts to contextualise chapter three, which focuses on 'Karma and human potentiality'. This chapter opens by evaluating the multiple interpretations of the rebirth, *karma*, and spiritual potential of female characters within and between the two traditions. These early discussions are then drawn together through the examina-

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tion of 'human actions and their results', with specific focus on highlighting the differing emphasis of the otherwise similar ethical codes of the early Buddhists and Jains. Their multi-life stories similarly warn against harming or taking life, sexual impropriety, and lying. In relation to non-harm, however, subtle differences become apparent in the sense that Jain stories emphasise the bad karmic results for the transgressor, whereas Buddhist stories tend towards encouraging generous or kindly acts which preserve life. Finally the 'happy endings' for these multi-life stories are categorised and compared, which acts to contextualise the following chapter on *jina*s and *buddha*s, who from the perspective of their respective traditions experience the happiest of endings.

Chapter four begins by introducing the *Nīlakēci*, within which a Jain nun makes a series of derisive comments regarding the Buddhist *jātaka* stories. This chapter thereby focuses on drawing out the points of difference between the two traditions, in relation to the past lives of the *jina*s and *buddha*s. Unlike Buddhism, Jainism does not have a *jātaka* genre, and thus preserves a far smaller number of stories depicting the past lives of *jina*s. The focus of Buddhist *jātaka*s centre on the Buddha and his lone pursuit of the perfections, with a focus on acts of generosity. *Jina*s, however, share a significant past with one another, never occupying a time when Jainism is absent, thus these stories focus on the pursuit and preservation of ascetic values. Appleton notably highlights the complex intertwining of the past lives of these eminent figures, and the significance of those predicted for the future, while demonstrating points of difference between the traditions in relation to both the moral emphasis of and their perspectives on the multi-life path to becoming a *jina* or *buddha*.

The fifth chapter delves into the complexity of *karma* itself, by examining the karmic connections between individuals over multiple lifetimes. The potential for merit-transfer and evidence for its manifestation in multi-life stories forms the first section of this discussion, after which the reader is introduced to a series of captivating stories illustrating 'interpersonal karmic bonds'. Although a karmic explanation for their occurrence remains somewhat unclear, Appleton illustrates the fascinating nature of these multi-life bonds, as arising from shared merit, love, hate, or complex contrast, and their implications for the characters involved.

The final chapter ponders the act of remembering a past life, or indeed foreseeing a future one. Initially Appleton addresses the question of who can remember a past life from the perspective of the respective traditions. This question is approached by revisiting the act of recollection within the human, animal, heaven, and hell realms of rebirth. The beneficial results of recalling these memories evident within the multi-life stories of each tradition are categorised and examined further, before these positive results are problematized somewhat. Appleton concludes the chapter by placing the positive outcome of these memories under scrutiny, highlighting: their potential to disrupt social harmony; the dangers that can arise from incomplete memories; challenges to omniscience; and the nature of predicting a future life.

From beginning to end, Appleton introduces the reader to numerous multi-life stories from a range of Buddhist and Jain sources. Although stories from various

sources are considered, most, but not all, are drawn from the Śvetāmbara Jain *aṅgas* and *upāṅgas*, and Theravāda Buddhist Pāli scriptures, with specific emphasis on texts from the *Khuddaka Nikāya*. As Appleton is careful to note, these sources are vast and thereby cannot be dealt with exhaustively, instead emphasis is placed on the richest sources or those that provide valuable insight for the discussion. Regardless of this narrowed focus, the reader is left with a richer understanding of and heightened appreciation for multi-life stories within the two traditions.

Moreover, Appleton cleverly develops the reader's comprehension of this literature by carefully navigating the use of depth and overview. At times much is to be drawn from the detail of these multi-life stories, as is illustrated in chapter one where the *Nārada-jātaka*, a story of a past life of the Buddha, acts to frame, introduce, and illustrate the key points that will be elaborated within the book. Appleton uses the detail of this story, therefore, to draw out important lines of questioning and creatively introduce the focus of the book while illustrating the fruits of the method.

Throughout the book specific stories become the focus of deeper analysis and are thus introduced with greater detail. At times the focus is upon following a particular character through multiple lives, such as the use of Pārśva's story in chapter four to frame the discussion of the past lives of *jina*s, in relation to the more numerous stories of the Buddha's past lives. In chapter five the relationship between two characters over many lives is illustrated by the details of King Yaśodhara and Candramatī's 'topsy-turvy' encounters. Appleton's detailed accounts act to not only highlight but illustrate the significance of lengthy multi-life stories within both Buddhism and Jainism, while also offering clarity to the more subtle differences between the traditions.

Central characters who appear in many stories or characters grouped under a broader designation also become the focus of deeper analysis themselves. In these instances multiple stories are sometimes summarised with less detail, as is the case in chapter two where details of types of characters and the realms they are reborn within are the subject of analysis, and in chapter four when the manifold past-lives of *jina*s and *buddha*s are elaborated. In these instances points of interest are developed by drawing multiple stories and their characters together, to highlight and analyse broader themes within and between the Buddhist and Jain literary sources.

Appleton also draws upon shared stories and characters appearing across traditions, which acts to highlight the nature of literary interactions between religious groups throughout South Asia. To illustrate the Buddhist emphasis on generosity and differing Jain focus on asceticism, Appleton introduces the Buddhist and Jain versions of the story of King Śibi, a dove, and an eagle, which is also found in the *Mahābhārata*. In one of the most detailed accounts of the book, the Jain version of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is also explored to illustrate the potential of hate to form a bond between beings over multiple lifetimes.

The rich multi-life stories which form the focus of this book, therefore, serve as a vibrant lens through which Appleton explores the complex workings of *karma* and its relation to rebirth. The balance between depth and overview found by Appleton

in the presentation of these stories leaves the reader with a greater appreciation for this literature and its significance within early Buddhism and Jainism. Perhaps most importantly, these stories through their captivating illustrations bring new-found clarity to key interactions and points of difference between these traditions and their place within the broader South Asian religious context.